

Natural Resource Protection News

*From the Town of Canandaigua
Environmental Conservation Board*

Gulls Breed on Squaw Island

By Doug Daniels

I was asked to write an article for the environmental newsletter. I had published an article in The Kingbird, the journal of the NYS Ornithological Association in December 2017 regarding nesting gulls on Canandaigua Lake. This is a simplified summation of that article.

History of Breeding

In the spring of 2009, Lyn Jacobs, a Canandaigua birder, kayaker and lakeside resident observed and confirmed that gulls were breeding on Canandaigua Lake. While many view gulls (often called seagulls) as nuisance birds, this was remarkable news for birders and nature enthusiasts. While gulls are omnipresent in the Finger Lakes region, they have rarely bred, and never on Canandaigua Lake.



Photos of first breeding Ring-billed Gulls by Lyn Jacobs

Squaw Island, located in the northwest corner of Canandaigua Lake, and the subject of dubious Native American legends, is one of only two islands in the eleven Finger Lakes. The other is Frontenac Island in Cayuga Lake, near Union Springs. Squaw Island is designated both a NYS Unique Area and a Wildlife Management Area -- at 0.20 acres, the smallest in NYS. This island was a popular

spot for boaters to anchor, get out in the shallow area and picnic on the island.

When Lyn first observed the breeding gulls from her kayak in 2009, there were 11 adult Ring-billed Gulls, 5 juveniles and 2 eggs. Since 2009, Lyn and I have both observed the annual breeding on Squaw Island, but it was not until 2012 that we began to document our observations in eBird and to make counts. At first, the growth of the breeding colony was slow, but from 2012 on, it has been dramatic. By 2014, there were 150 adults and an estimated 25 juveniles. In 2016, 600 gulls occupied all areas of the island, with 75 young and an estimated 50 more eggs to hatch. Additionally, that year I observed and photographed Herring Gulls also breeding. Of interest, the Herring Gulls' nests occupied the north and south ends of the island. One could speculate that the ends of the island are "choice locations," which the larger Herring Gulls claim; the adults can watch over the lake for predators (Bald Eagles have nested on the west shore) or interfering humans. I have not kayaked to the island yet this year, but I have observed the colony from City Pier with a telescope. I would estimate about 400-500 adult gulls on the island. This will be the eleventh consecutive year that gulls have bred on Squaw Island.



Photos of Herring Gull on nest and with chick by Doug Daniels

In 2014, an unnamed person attempted to disrupt the breeding of these birds. The DEC became involved since that behavior is prohibited by the Migratory Bird Act of 1918 – gulls are included. This joint legislation between Canada and the USA is one of the great pieces of environmental legislation and has stood for over one hundred years. It is, however, being threatened by the current administration in Washington.

The Future of Gulls on Squaw Island

Time will tell whether these two species of gulls, masters of adaptation, will continue to breed on Squaw Island. Human intervention, environmental law and decisions regarding land usage and land preservation will impact the status of their breeding. Cormorants have followed gulls in breeding on islands in eastern Lake Ontario (Little and Big Galoo Islands). Cormorants are despised by fisherman due to their diet of fish. Cormorants have been observed the past two years on Squaw Island by Lyn and me, but they have not bred. In addition to gulls, large predatory birds, Ospreys and Bald Eagles, are now gracing the skies over Canandaigua Lake due to the banning of DDT and NYS conservation efforts. These magnificent birds now breed in the Canandaigua watershed.

Life History of Gulls

There are 27 species of gulls in North America. To my knowledge, 9 species have been observed on Canandaigua Lake. Only Ring-billed and Herring are common and Ring-billed are 90% of the gulls you are likely to see. Ring-billed weigh about one pound and have a 48-inch wingspan. Herring Gulls weigh 2.5 pounds and have a 58-inch wingspan.

All gulls are found near water both fresh and salt. They have adapted to life near man, benefitting from landfills and farming. Gulls are perhaps the most opportunistic of all birds. They are found on all 7 continents. A challenge to

identify, gulls go through two molts a year and both Ring-billed and Herring Gulls take three years to mature to adults. That means six different plumages! Adults are primarily white and immature birds are gray-brown.

Gulls nest colonially on the ground in a hollow or a mound of weeds and grasses. They prefer islands or protected beaches where they have some protection from man and predators. Adults form monogamous pair-bonds. Females lay clutches of 3-4 eggs. Both adults incubate the eggs which hatch in 22-26 days. The young fledge (leave the nest and are independent) in 4-7 weeks. Female gulls who have not bred may assist in guarding the young. When disturbed, the entire colony becomes very vocal and collectively act to protect the colony.

Most gulls migrate south to warmer coastal areas in fall and winter. They do not migrate as a species but rather as individuals or in smaller groups. Waterfowl often migrate in massive flocks. You may have witnessed Snow Geese (some springs numbering ten thousand on Canandaigua Lake) all rise up in one massive flock from the ice or water to fly north to their breeding territories in the Arctic. As long as there is open water, some gulls will remain throughout the winter. Those birds typically spend night on the water and then move to agricultural fields to feed during the day.
